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Owl Creek nordic race to draw Olympic hopefuls

By Steve Benson

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Olympic nordic skiing hopefuls will flock to Aspen in February as the Owl Creek Chase received North American Marathon Cup series status from the International Ski Federation (FIS) last week.

Last spring, it was also announced that the popular citizens race would be awarded a spot on this year's United States Ski and Snowboard Association (USSA) Nor/Am Supertour schedule.

As a result, the Owl Creek Chase will be an Olympic trial event, and a major draw for the country's top nordic skiers.

It's the first time in history that a nordic race in Aspen has received FIS distinction and it's been more than 25 years since the last USSA-sanctioned nordic event hit town.

"It's pretty amazing," said Bob Wade of the Ute Mountaineer, which, along with the city of Aspen and the Aspen/Snowmass Nordic Council, pushed for the distinctions. "It kind of brings cross-country skiing back to the masses."

The FIS North American Marathon Cup holds only four races a year, with the other three taking place in Michigan, Minnesota and California this season.

The USSA's Supertour consists of 26 races in 11 venues around the country.

Members of the U.S. Olympic nordic team will be selected based on their FIS and USSA point standings accumulated between January 2005 and January 2006. Some top international racers may also make the trip, and as always the race is expected to attract a large amateur field.

Held Feb. 12, the Owl Creek Chase will test racers on a 25-kilometer point-to-point course from Snowmass Village to Aspen.

"There's something really special about point-to-point races," Wade said. "To go from Snowmass to Aspen through that incredible terrain - it's just a wonderful race course."

Aspen's Casey Ward, an Olympic hopeful who grew up racing with the Aspen Valley Ski and Snowboard Club, was ecstatic to finally see the race recognized on such a level.

"I'm psyched about it, it's awesome," said Ward, 28. "We've had Alpine World Cup races here for years, and now we get to have a high-caliber nordic race."

Ward finished second in last year's Owl Creek Chase - which had returned after a two-year hiatus - behind Boulder's Nathan Schultz. At the finish line, Ward was already pleading a case for USSA and FIS distinction.

"It's a really fun race. It's world class and it has potential," he said last February. "Hopefully the powers that be around here will make this a [marquee] race."

Ward said he spoke with Luke Bodensteiner, USSA's nordic director, later that spring and Bodensteiner gave him the green light.

"He was like, 'Yeah, we can do that,'" Ward said. "He encouraged me to go to Nancy Lesley with the city [of Aspen] and she had the energy to put together a Nor/Am race."

Ward said once the USSA sanction was awarded, it appeared to open the door to the FIS. Typically in the past, the USSA has been more difficult to corral, as it's been hesitant to recognize nordic races at high altitude, such as the Owl Creek Chase.

But according to Wade, they've been relaxing their stance recently.

"The USSA has decided that they're trying to get these bigger races tied up with well-run citizen races," he said, acknowledging that the Owl Creek Chase fits that mold. Furthermore, Wade said several racers were impressed by the conditions on the course in last year's Owl Creek Chase, and the timing couldn't have been better.

"People were just really blown away by the quality of the skiing," he said. "And coincidentally the USSA was sort of loosening up its policies on where races could happen."

Many of the Supertour races are held at low-altitude venues in such places as Wisconsin and Minnesota, where course conditions can be more unpredictable than at high-altitude Rocky Mountain locales in midwinter.

"They've had a lot of problems running races in the past [and] getting rained out in the middle of the season," Wade said.

The Owl Creek Chase, which is held in mid-February, typically boasts excellent course conditions.

"In February, it's really hard to screw up the snow," Wade said. "We're really happy we got it at a safe time of year."

"We're just really excited we can show it off because it's great skiing, and it has been for many years. We haven't been on the radar screen for that [FIS] crowd, but I'm convinced we will be now."

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